

Encounters with Jesus

John 4:5-42

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." ¹⁷ The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" ¹⁹ The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." ³² But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³ So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" ³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Last week as we looked at the call of Abram and his faithful response to God. That reminded us we are never too old, never too young, it matters not where we live or where we go...we can accept God's call on our lives. In our scripture and from John 3:1-17, the New Testament reading from last week, we see two people have similar but different encounters with Jesus. At first glance, the woman whom Jesus meets at the well in Sychar could not be more different from Nicodemus. She is an uneducated woman, a learner; he is an educated man whom Jesus describes as a teacher of Israel. She is a Samaritan; he is a Jew. She has a questionable, and maybe shameful past; he is a respected moral leader in his community. She meets Jesus at noontime; he comes at midnight. Each has an encounter with Jesus, and both Nicodemus and the unnamed woman at the well, in their own right play important roles in the Gospel narrative.

One characteristic of the woman is that she is almost totally an outsider. A woman in a man's world, she is a stranger to Judaism, the practices and geography of faith, conventional morality, and the gospel (she remains unnamed to centuries of readers). Is she so much of an outsider that she is considered socially deviant by her community? Is she ostracized by them, stigmatized for her status or behavior? We cannot determine this from the text.

We may be able to say, however, that in the eyes of the Gospel writer this woman is a nobody. She does not even merit a name, and her gender, religious orientation, social standing, and personal habits distance her from Jesus and her community. We expect that people will try to avoid this woman and ignore her whenever possible.

Being a nobody is not an easy mantle to wear, except maybe for Emily Dickinson, who appeared to relish the role in her poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" For Dickinson the idea of being a public somebody was a gloomy prospect, but she may have been the exception. Most people want to avoid the pain of being nobodies; they want to be recognized and cherished as somebodies who matter.

This text is good news for anyone who has ever felt the humiliation of stigmatization or the pain of being a nobody, because Jesus does not turn away from this woman. On the contrary, he engages her in conversation, takes her seriously, and spends several days in her village. This woman, her community, and their welfare matter to Jesus, whether nobodies or not. That is good news!

It is also challenging news, because it reminds us as the church that people who are nobodies to us are somebodies in the eyes of Jesus. Who are those nobodies? They are the people we ignore. Maybe they are our neighbors, or the strangers who walk through the door, or a potential group to be evangelized and welcomed into the household of faith. This text reminds faithful readers and listeners that sometimes our attempts to draw the boundaries of the faith community are too narrow. We often prefer to leave out the nobodies, but Jesus does not do that. He welcomes outsiders, as well as insiders, into discipleship.

He also welcomes people who are just starting the journey of faith. The second characteristic of the woman is that she is a newcomer to faith, and during this conversation with Jesus she takes baby steps. Jesus is so patient with her! His willingness to explain his metaphors and stay with the conversation is in stark contrast to his impatient discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus does not make fun of this woman, as he does of Nicodemus, and he does not chastise her for her left-brain response to his right-brain language. Instead, he nurtures her, nudges her

along, like a parent teaching a young child. Though he is hard on Nicodemus, Jesus is kind to this woman.

Deborah Kapp once had a pastor who liked to preach about what he called "the toughness and tenderness of Jesus." We see those contradictory characteristics in Jesus as we put these texts side by side. Jesus can be confrontational, and he can be compassionate. He can be unyielding, and he can be generous.

We see his tenderness as he encourages the woman's growth in faith. Any believer who feels like a newcomer to faith and who is also taking baby steps can take heart in this. Jesus supports us as we move toward him and grow in understanding. He wants us to deepen and extend our faith, to recognize and acknowledge him for who he is.

Jesus can be tough too, and the woman gets a taste of that. In the course of her conversation with him, he uncovers her life story. The exposure comes as Jesus talks with her about her husband and looks beneath her self-presentation. She says of Jesus that he "told me everything I have ever done" (v. 29). There is an honesty in the woman's encounter with Jesus that lays open her past, yet she does not appear to be shamed by this conversation and confession. **Deborah J. Kapp**

Jesus makes God known to this woman at the well and, as a result, makes her a cowitness to his work in the world, one whose labor helps bring in the harvest (vv. 34-38). While she is not absolutely certain that Jesus is the Christ, she does not let that stop her from leaving behind her water jar, which represents anything that might hold her back. Going into the city, she invites her fellow townspeople to their own encounter with Jesus. She responds to Jesus in a way that leads Jesus to reveal his true identity to her; in doing so, she sees her own identity evolve. We learn from the Samaritan woman that in our own encounters with Jesus, we are not only changed, but what God reveals to us changes as well.

Instead, her encounter with Jesus emboldens the woman to go and tell all her friends and neighbors about this man. When the woman returns to her village, she invokes the very words that Jesus says to his first disciples, "Come and see" (1:39). Through her invitation and the sharing of her experience, many believe in him (v. 39). The scene that follows replicates Jesus' calling of the first disciples. Jesus "stays" with the Samaritans, as did the first disciples (1:39). It is because of this abiding with Jesus that the Samaritans are able to confess, "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (v. 42). In this unexpected witness, this Samaritan village is the narrative fulfillment of 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." **Karoline M. Lewis**

Like the prophet Isaiah, who is liberated for service when he confesses his sin in the temple (Isa. 6:1-8), the woman is freed for discipleship after Jesus exposes her needs and failings. She becomes his witness.

This story narrates the dramatic transformation of the woman. She begins the story as an outsider and becomes a witness; from her status as a beginner in faith she becomes an apostle sent by Jesus himself to testify on his behalf. As such she is a model for other women, for people who feel like nobodies, for newcomers to the faith, and for people with a past. Jesus encounters and welcomes many into the household of faith—even the least likely and maybe, even, you and me. **Deborah J. Kapp**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.